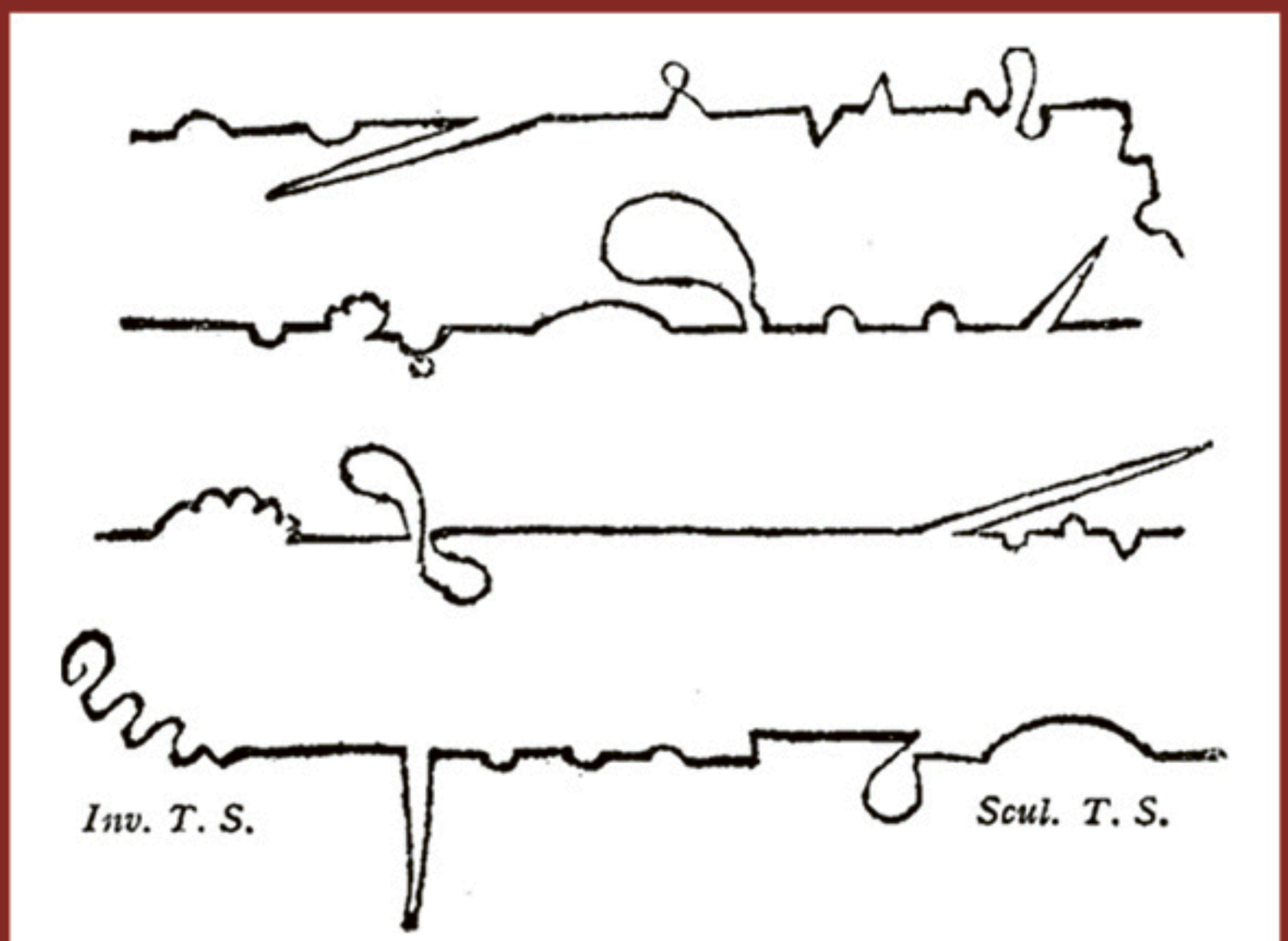
Agrégation

ANGLAIS

Laurence Sterne

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman



Sous la direction de
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ellipses

Introduction

Anne-Laure Fortin-Tournès et Anne Rouhette

"There was a certain king of Bo—he—" (VIII, xix, p. 451[1]). With these words and fragments of words, Corporal Trim begins and almost ends what remains perhaps the most famous of untold stories, about which, apart from the fact that it is set in Bohemia and involves a king and seven castles, Tristram's readers, like Uncle Toby, know tantalizingly little. But stories themselves, readers of *Tristam Shandy* will discover, do not matter as much as how they are told. In the first place, how do they begin? "[W]ith writing the first sentence—and trusting to Almighty God for the second" (VIII, ii, p. 436)? Coming as it does in the novel's penultimate volume, what this statement suggests is that beginning is a constantly ongoing business. This is true at least for Sterne's narrator, obsessed as he is with origins, his own most of all. Symptomatically enough, Tristan finds it so hard to tell his own story that he focuses instead mostly on his uncle's life and his father's opinions, not even managing to get himself born before Volume III and claiming that his narrative only really begins as late as Volume IV, after the death of his brother Bobby: "From this moment I am to be considered as heir-apparent to the *Shandy* family——and it is from this point properly, that the story of my Life and my Opinions sets out" (IV, xxxii, p. 269). But the reality and temporality of reading and writing prove otherwise, since at the end of Volume VI he still declares himself in the process of beginning: "I am now beginning to get fairly into my work, and by the help of a vegetable diet, with a few of the cold seeds, I make no doubt but I shall be able to go on with my uncle *Toby*'s story, and my own, in a tolerable straight line" (xl, p. 379).

How a story is told is thus critical. But perhaps another question should be asked: *where* to begin? Tristram wryly misquotes Horace and advocates for a start *ab ovo*, "from the egg", whereas the Latin poet was in favour of beginning *in medias res* (I, iv) – a first sign of Sterne's/ Tristram's rule-bending disposition. So following our narrator's lead, we could start with Laurence Sterne's birth, in

1 All references between parentheses are to Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. by Ian Campbell Ross, Oxford, Oxford University Press (Oxford World's Classics), 2009.

the hope that the author's life can help us understand his most famous creation, all the more so as Sterne acknowledged that he had put much of himself into his novel, writing: "'Tis… a picture of myself[2]". He was born—thankfully no record exists of his conception—on November 24, 1713, in Clonmel (Ireland) where his father, an ensign in an infantry regiment, was stationed. The family then followed Sterne's father's regiment to various places, giving Laurence the familiarity with military life displayed by Toby and Trim in *Tristram Shandy*. A rich relation sent him to Cambridge, after which he became a priest and settled near York in a life which he seems to have found dull and depressing, and from which he partly found relief in the various libraries available to him. That is probably where he gained "the far-fetched learning which was such a strong ingredient in his books", according to Ernest A. Baker[3]. After *A Political Romance* (1759), a successful humoristic tract written against a local ecclesiastical lawyer (probably referred to as Didius in *Tristram Shandy*), Sterne decided to embark on something more ambitious. The first two volumes of *Tristam Shandy* were published in 1759-60, volumes III, IV in January 1761, volumes V and VI in December of the same year, volumes VII and VIII in 1765, and Volume IX in 1767. His other major work is *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), whose narrator is Yorick, the parson in *Tristram Shandy*, under whose name Sterne also published his own sermons in 1760 and 1766. In March 1768, a month after the publication of his *Journey*, the author died of consumption, from which he had long suffered; the "vile cough" which plagues Tristram (IV, xxxii, p. 270) is a reminder of Sterne's "bad health", directly alluded to in the dedication opening Volume V (p. 273).

The first volumes were spectacularly successful and turned Sterne into a literary sensation fêted all across Europe. But when it became known that the author of such a bawdy narrative was a clergyman, the criticism that the book elicited for its seemingly chaotic structure took another turn and included moral assessments: how could a man of the church write such an obscene book? The criticism began soon after the first two volumes were published, and traces of Sterne's reactions to it are perceptible in the rest of the work in the form of Tristram's mocking words with respect to critics whose heads "are stuck […] full of rules and compasses" (III, xii, p. 143) and whom he calls "Anti-Shandeans" or "great wigs" (III, xx, p. 153 and 160). *Tristram Shandy*, in short, evolved with its author:

2 *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, ed. Lewis P. Curtis (London: Oxford University Press, 1935) 86.

3 *The History of the English Novel*, vol. IV (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1950) 246.

Tristram experiences events that happened to Sterne (e.g. his journey to France in Volume VII), while his narrative reflects a changing literary and intellectual climate, which explains the growing sentimentalism in the later volumes.

This leads us to consider the context in which *Tristram Shandy* was published—another "egg" with which we might have started. The beginning of the 18th century in Britain is associated with what Ian Watt famously described as "the rise of the novel"[4], thanks to writers like Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), Samuel Richardson (1689-1761), Henry Fielding (1707-1754), Charlotte Lennox (1730-1804) and Tobias Smollett (1721-1771). These writers felt that they were developing a new ("novel"), distinctive type of prose fiction, a "new species of writing", in the phrase Richardson used with regard to his *Pamela* (1740)[5]. Prefiguring Tristram's disdain for rules, the narrator in Fielding's *Tom Jones* declares: "I shall not look on myself as accountable to any court of jurisdiction whatever; for as I am, in reality, the founder of a new province of writing, so I am at liberty to make what laws I please therein[6]". Novelists like Fielding and Richardson sought to convey a greater impression of fidelity to human experience than had previously been found in *romance* narratives characterised by unbridled imagination and dubious plausibility. One of their strategies was to move towards a more "subjective" kind of fiction and to tell a story through the experiences and emotions of the male or female protagonist. The titles of the most popular and important novels of the 18th century bear witness to this subjective streak in the way they emphasize one eponymous protagonist. To name but a few, Defoe wrote *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *Moll Flanders* (1722) and *Roxana* (1724); Richardson *Pamela* (1740-41), *Clarissa* (1747-48) and *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-54); Fielding *Joseph Andrews* (1742), *Tom Jones* (1749) and *Amelia* (1751); Smollett, *Roderick Random* (1748), *Peregrine Pickle* (1751) and *Humphrey Clinker* (1771), and of course Sterne also chose to entitle his novel by the name of a fictional character. To claim, however, that *Tristram Shandy* really does explore its title character's psyche and adventures would be foolhardy, and therein lies a fundamental difference between Sterne's masterpiece and those of his 18th century predecessors and contemporaries.

4 Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel. Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957). This paragraph goes far too quickly over a very complex and multi-faceted phenomenon that is described at greater length for instance in Thomas Keymer's "Sterne and the 'New Species of Writing'", in *Laurence Sterne's* Tristram Shandy, *A Casebook*, edited by Thomas Keymer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 50-75.

5 Watt, *op. cit.*, 208.

6 Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones* [1749] (Oxford: Oxford University Press [Oxford World's Classics], 2008) 68.

Indeed, some readers are reluctant to consider *Tristram Shandy* a novel. While Ian Watt defines it "not so much as a novel as a parody of a novel"[7], its avowed models hark back to the Renaissance (Rabelais, Montaigne…) or the early 17th century (Cervantes), as critics like Melvyn New point out, stressing its satirical dimension[8]. On the other hand, its portrayal of the absurdity of human existence, steeped in "riddles and mysteries" (IV, xvii, p. 233), has led other critics to see Sterne as our contemporary, a proto-postmodern writer as it were, making him an "inexplicable anachronism" as John Traugott puts it[9]. Doubtless Sterne himself encouraged this plurality of interpretations, resorting to the metaphor of a walking stick's handle to describe his readers' approaches: "In *Tristram Shandy*, the handle is taken which suits their [the readers'] passions, their ignorance or sensibility[10]". Without disregarding other interpretations, most contributions in this volume consider *Tristram Shandy* as a novel and follow Thomas Keymer's view that it enters into a dialogue with its immediate predecessors, "absorb[ing] and resum[ing] the most vexed topics of experimentation and debate in novels such as *Clarissa* and *Tom Jones*, notably the mimetic efficacy (or otherwise) of narrative language, the dynamics of communication between narrator and reader, and the openness of narrative meaning to plural construction."[11] What makes Sterne's novel "novel" in the strong sense of the term is probably the extent to which it takes liberties with the emerging codes of the genre, while inserting itself in its general experimental economy, and it is this singularity that the rest of this introduction wishes to explore.

7 Watt, *op. cit.,* 291.

8 See for instance Melvyn New, *Laurence Sterne as Satirist — A Reading of* Tristram Shandy (Indiantown: University of Florida Press, 1969).

9 John Traugott, "Introduction" (*Laurence Sterne*, ed. John Traugott, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 1.

10 *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, *op. cit.* 411. The metaphor occurs in *Tristram Shandy* too: "by seizing every handle, of what size or shape soever, which chance held out to me in this journey—I turned my plain into a city" (VII, xliii, p. 430).

11 Keymer, *op. cit.,* 52.

Indeed, if the novel as a genre can be defined through its experimentation with form and content, since its very name betrays its ambition for novelty and originality, Sterne's own novel distinguishes itself as being unique, and even singular in Derek Attridge's sense of the term[12]. Unicity and originality are Tristram's declared ambitions as a writer, and this is why he threatens at the end of his first volume to tear out any page whose content the reader would be able to surmise in advance, so firmly does he assert his desire to follow no existing path:

> What these perplexities of my uncle Toby were,—'tis impossible for you to guess:—if you could,—I should blush; not as a relation,—not as a man, —not even as a woman,— but I should blush as an author; inasmuch as I set no small store by myself upon this very account, that my reader has never yet been able to guess at any thing. And in this, Sir, I am of so nice and singular a humour, that if I thought you was able to form the least judgment or probable conjecture to yourself, of what was to come in the next page,— I would tear it out of my book. (I, xxv, p. 63).

Among his contemporaries, Sterne stands out as a particularly daring, innovative and experimental author, owing to his approach to his linguistic material which brings forward the texture of his text in a way that to us appears very modern. Tristram's peculiar use of punctuation (the rhetoric of dashes, for instance), his reliance on italics to signal the inclusion of other texts (one remembers, *inter alia*, the Memoire on the opportunity of baptizing an unborn child which Tristram includes at the end of Volume I, Chapter xx), the use of heteroglossia, in the form of the presence of other languages like French or Latin in the main English text, the use of asterisks and typographic effects that force the reader to reconsider the linguistic material as developing in space as much as in time[13] (the use of different fonts and bold characters as for instance in Tristram's laying out of the article in his mother's marriage settlement for the reader in I, xv), the presence

12 The word "singular" is to be understood here in the sense of the unique power of creation and innovation of literary works that define themselves through a certain type of attention paid to language: "Singularity, like alterity and inventiveness, is not a property but an event, the event of singularizing which takes place in reception : it does not occur outside the responses of those who encounter and constitute it. It is produced, not given in advance, and its emergence is also the beginning of its erosion, as it brings about the cultural changes necessary to accommodate it. Singularity is not the same as autonomy, particularity, identity, contingency, or specificity; nor is it to be equated with uniqueness, which refers to an entity which is unlike all other entities without being inventive in its difference, without introducing otherness into the sphere of the same." Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017) 64.

13 "Sterne would seem to be as interested in the spaces for creation between the words, lines, and paragraphs as in the words themselves. The entire book is expressive, and the entire book, for Sterne and for his reader, includes the experience of the reader reading it", explains Robert A. Erikson in *Mother Midnight. Birth, Sex, and Fate in Eighteenth-Century Fiction (Defoe, Richardson, and Sterne* (New York: AMS Press Inc, 1986) 197.

of words scratched out like "~~BRAVO~~" at the end of Yorick's funeral sermon for Le Fever (VI, xi, p. 345), all those elements make Sterne's novel an unparalleled exercise in writerly freedom. But what characterizes *Tristram Shandy* and does not appear in any other novel of the period—among a cohort of works that seem to be vying for formal innovation—is the co-presence of text and image, the inclusion of visual material in language to produce a unique manner of capturing adventures, opinions and feelings, making the novel "a 'coexistential' verbo-visual whole", as Peter J. De Voogd explains[14]. It is remarkable that "the imperfections of words" (V, vii, p. 288) in describing reality and desire, as Tristram has it, lead to intermediality in the novel, to the insertion of images into the text, not as mere illustrations or complements to it, but to replace and supplement it, as a true material and bodily solution to overcome the problem of the failure of words to fully express the world and the life of the mind.

Indeed, if *Tristram Shandy* is famous for the conspicuous texture of its textuality, in other words for the way the text draws attention towards its own materiality, it is also unique in its inclusion of visual images within the text. It is perhaps this inclusion of images in the text, and the conversation that these images conduct with the text itself, that make *Tristram Shandy* most inimitable. Discourse like this invites the reader to reflect on language, writing and the art of the novel as such. It opens a self-reflexive questioning of the limitation of words, of their incapacity to fully encompass the variety of sensory experiences and sentiments, by deictically pointing at the image as an efficient relay for expression. Thus a black page appears at the end of Volume I, Chapter xi, to signify the devastation of Yorick's death more poignantly than words could say[15]; a marbled page appears at the end of Volume III, Chapter xxxvi, to visually and emblematically encapsulate the motley dimension of the book for the reader[16]; material lines appear at the beginning of Volume VI, Chapter xl, to materialize the various narrative strands followed by Tristram in volumes I, II, III, IV and V, aiming for the "excellency" (p. 380) of the straight line in Volume VI, and a spiralling line appears at the end of Volume IX, chapter iv, to materialize Corporal Trim's

14 Peter J. De Voogd, "*Tristram Shandy* as Aesthetic Object", in *Laurence Sterne's* Tristram Shandy. *A Casebook,* ed. by Thomas Keymer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 109.

15 The Oxford World's Classics edition includes a white page instead of a black one, with several other changes to Sterne's typographical choices. Since Sterne paid great attention to the material dimension of *Tristram Shandy*, we encourage candidates to look up an original edition of his novel on the Internet, on ECCO (Eighteenth-Century Collections Online) for instance or on Google Books, which features a reproduction of the second edition. Helen Williams's contribution to this volume explores the visual aspects of *Tristram Shandy* and Sterne's book design at greater length.

16 On the marbled page, see Alain Bony's insightful chapter "La Couture et le gond : la page marbrée dans *Tristram Shandy*" (in *Leonora, Lydia et les autres*, Lyon : PUL, 2004, p. 315-329).

evocation of the delights of liberty through his gesture with his stick (p. 490). Tristram's experimental insertion of images within text and with the various modalities of text and image may enter into a conversation with each other that is part of Sterne's signature style in *Tristram Shandy*. The freedom of Sterne's choice of intermediality is unparalleled in the 18th century novel and matched in its inventiveness only by his handling of narrative temporality.

Tristram's ironical praise of the straight line contradicts his quest for totality, and this contradiction expresses itself in the novel's digressive-progressive temporality. Indeed, in order to tell everything about his life and opinions, Tristram's narrative needs to be all-encompassing, but this induces a rejection of linearity and teleology, because life is neither linear nor teleological. In this respect, one might argue that what Sterne has proposed to the reader is a "queer aesthetic of writing"[17], one that does not follow the traditional temporal chronology of a plot which, according to Aristotle's *Poetics*, should start at the beginning of the protagonist's life, go through its middle and end with its end. Tristram's narrative, on the other hand, follows Hogarth's ideal of the serpentine, i.e. sinuous line of beauty[18] rather than the flat encephalic line that Tristram wishes to keep in view in Volume VI of the novel. The novel's disrupted temporality, perhaps best exemplified by the extraordinary sentence "a cow broke in (tomorrow morning) to my uncle Toby's fortifications" (III, xxxviii, p. 187), presents events according to their intensity or their impact on the various characters' minds, not according to the time when they took place, in a sinuous way that eschews chronological order. Although text-time is inescapably linear and therefore cannot correspond to the multilinearity of real story-time, Tristram manages, thanks to the power of his memory, to just hold everything together: *Tristram Shandy*'s famous time shifts, which contribute to the apparent absence of chronology, illustrate the fiction of fictional time but they also bring together all the motifs and make them interdependent:

> —Now this is the most puzzled skein of all—[…] for I am this moment walking across the market-place of Auxerre with my father and my uncle Toby, in our way back to dinner—and I am this moment also entering Lyons with my post-chaise broke into a thousand pieces—and I am moreover this moment in a handsome pavilion built by Pringello, upon

17 Cf. "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion". In *Queer Temporalities* Elisabeth Freeman ed., special issue of *GLQ* 13.2-3 (2007) 177-195.

18 William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, Written with a View to Fixing the Fluctuating Ideas of Taste, London: John Reeves, 1753, ch. XI.

> the banks of the Garonne […] where I now sit rhapsodising all these affairs. (VII, xxviii, p. 413-414)

Tristram juggles with three different moments of his life, as all three are present to his consciousness; in all three cases, he is "in the middle of things" (IV, xiii, p. 228). Memory seems to annihilate the passing of time, giving an impression of timelessness.

In the course of the novel Tristram himself repeatedly defends his authorial right to move backward and forward in time as he chooses, for purposes of verisimilitude. He relies so heavily on digressions that plot elements, if any, recede into the background; the novel is thus full of long essayistic passages remarking on something other than the main plot, starting with the opening chapter in Volume I, where Tristram's desire to start his narrative *ab ovo* gets thwarted by Mrs Shandy's interruption of her husband, which leads to a scene of *coitus interruptus*. The interruption induces the "scatter[ing] and dispers[ing] [of] the animal spirits, whose business it was to have escorted and gone hand-in hand with the *Homunculus*" (p. 6). Tristram seems to be following Locke's theory of the association of ideas here and elsewhere to the letter[19], which leads him to fracture the sequence of the stories he tells and interject them with associated ideas, memories, and anecdotes, thus allowing thematic significance to emerge out of unexpected juxtapositions between apparently unrelated events, the irony being that what Tristram both claims as his freedom and as a bane, namely the lack of chronological temporality in this narrative, is in fact a convincing representation of the way the human mind really works. It furthermore adds the ironical self-critique of the idiosyncrasy of the mind's capacity to associate freely, which Tristram calls the "hobby-horse".

This liberation from the narrative conventions employed to produce the illusion of temporal order, which is claimed as a principle of writing by Tristram, may affirm a challenge to norms. The narrative itself, with its progressive and regressive temporality, its characteristic irony that ridicules all the male characters, its salacious prose, its sodomitic jokes, and its constant double entendres, circulates an erotic energy that goes not only from the masculine to the feminine and

19 "[F]rom an unhappy association of ideas which have no connection in nature, it so fell out at length, that my poor mother could never hear the said clock wound up—but the thoughts of some other things unavoidably popp'd into her head, – – and *vice versa* : – – which strange combination of ideas, the sagacious *Locke*, who certainly understood the nature of these things better than most men, affirms to have produced more wry actions than all other sources of prejudice whatsoever" (I, v, p. 9). It must be stressed however that Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) presents such activity of the mind as pathological, a sane association of ideas for Locke being prompted by logic and reason.

vice versa, but also from the masculine to the masculine, from the feminine to the feminine, and from the human to language itself and to the world at large, suggesting the possibility of a pansexuality which the term "hobby-horse" may equally apply to, to designate the very essence of the desire for life and for the life of the mind that manifests itself in all directions in Sterne's novel, and makes it so enjoyable.

Chapter 1, written by Alain Montandon, deals precisely with this freedom that characterizes *Tristram Shandy*'s writing, and opens the volume on a panorama of the various instances of transgression that the novel displays on the level of form as well as of content. From typography to free association, to sexuality and a close interest paid to bodily matters, *Tristram Shandy* singles itself out, among all its intertexts, through the "formidable impression of life" that it gives off, in relation to its deliberate disregarding of the strictures of the norm. Famously characterized by a digressive-progressive temporality, the novel both surprises the reader and enthrals him or her through the verisimilitude of its sinuous investigations of Tristram's life and opinions. Its very rich legacy testifies to its canonical status, a legacy that extends to modernism, postmodernism and our current period of time.

In Chapter 2, Helen Williams reflects on the design of the book itself. Intended to "surprise, delight and entertain" by its author, *Tristram Shandy* still captivates us today for the singularity of its design and layout, which innovatively includes visual as well as linguistic materials, in conversation with what is being explored on the level of plot. From page and typographic play to the deliberate omission of a number of pages from the book, *Tristram Shandy*'s unique design performs on a visual and material level many of the interrogations raised in the body of the text, to "question our assumptions about the physical make-up of the novel", making it impossible for the reader to encounter the book passively.

Drawing on the idea that intertextuality is key to understanding the novel, Chapter 3 focuses on the rich conversation held between *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Quixote*. In this chapter, Yen-Maï Tran-Gervat shows that Tristram's exploratory and non-linear narrative is inspired from its Cervantesque hypotext, and that Tristram refers precisely to specific passages in the hypotext which Sterne knew in depth. Cervantesque humour is also very present in *Tristram Shandy*, and all-pervasive in the mock-heroic passages that abound in the novel.

More generally, the cast of lovable eccentrics who people the pages of the novel can be interpreted as so many versions of Don Quixote himself, with his folly, his hobby-horse, his extravagance but also his deeply human and humane qualities.

In Chapter 4, Mary Newbould shows that conversation is not only intertextual but also a true ethos of writing for Sterne. "Noisy with talking", *Tristram Shandy* explores the various means of communication that human beings possess. Newbould's argument is that the idea and practice of conversation evolve throughout Sterne's novel to include the readers themselves, inside or outside the text, thus reflecting the 18th century's interest in self-expression and sociability. A literary tour-de-force, conversation in *Tristram Shandy* poses the challenge of having to transcribe orality into written words, a challenge which author-narrator Tristram meets by reversing it, by transforming "writing" itself into "a different name for conversation" (II, xi 87) facilitating human communication.

Pierre Dubois's Chapter 5 places music and dance as central features in the meaning of the text, displaying a capacity for non-verbal communication as an alternative to failing words. Music, which is therefore linked with "the crisis of language", is present in three guises in the text: first through its musicalisation, which aims to express and cope with the complexity of the world, second through the representation of musical scenes which represent an illusory ideal of harmony, and third through the narrator's own theorising of music, writing and life. Dance, for its part, opens the possibility of idyllic pastoral in the text. Yet the harmony both music and dance seem to promise are denounced by the text as illusory at worst, transitory at best, because music "is the ultimate metaphor of the inevitable failure of controlling reality through writing".

Chapter 6, written by Anne-Laure Fortin-Tournès, picks up on the idea that dance has a self-reflexive dimension in *Tristram Shandy*, to analyse its representation as an event for writing and reading. According to Fortin-Tournès, dance, as represented in Volume VII of the novel, defines Sterne's writing ethos as a performative event that asserts the importance of physical movement for the vitality of life and of the text itself. Indeed, not only does dance bring the narrator Tristram new energy to continue his journey after his encounter with death, but it also changes his mode of writing and opens it to the possibilities of a sentimental journey.

Picking up on the importance of the role played by women in the event of the narrator's encounter with dance, Chapter 7 written by Mariana Teixeira Marques-Pujol purposes to demonstrate that women shape Tristram Shandy as a "richly

heteroglot text", prompting reflexions on the role of women in Sterne's creative writing. The range of female characters present in the text, their generosity, vitality or sentiment, suggest a certain degree of agency which, when compared with the discursive capabilities of male characters, aptly reflects the complexity of gender roles and relations in the society of the time.

In Chapter 8, Anne Rouhette prolongs the reflexion on the importance of movement in *Tristram Shandy* by probing into the structuring dimension of the journey in *Tristram Shandy*. Present not only as a theme, but also as a metaphor for the act of narrating and of writing itself, the journey motif is problematised in Sterne's novel in the way Tristram's narrative resists the conventions of chronological linearity. The journey is not so much something the characters undertake at the level of plot as a figure that presides over the discursive trajectory of the narrative itself. Indeed, if Volume VII of *Tristram Shandy* can partly be read as a parody of the genre of travel narrative, the novel's playful handling of the trope of life as journey, its preoccupation with the materiality of language, and the problematic connection it establishes between words and the world, make journeying a felicitous metaphor for the novel itself.

Chapter 9 is the occasion for David Stoyle to demonstrate the comic role of encyclopaedism in *Tristram Shandy*. Grounding his analysis in the idea that the 18th century was the age of Encyclopaedias, Stoyle shows that Sterne has a "passion for reference learning", while taking referencing to such extreme lengths that one cannot help but see irony at work there. Through the saturation of his text with encyclopaedic lists and digressions that hinder communication more than they enhance it, Sterne targets the "weak parts" of the sciences of his time and the general hubris of scientists. He probes into the problems of the selection, classification and systematisation of knowledge posed by Encyclopaedism as Tristram attempts to write his all-encompassing cyclopedia and his father Walter fails to write his *Tristrapaedia* which is much too long to be of any use. It is finally the reader's sagacity which the novel puts to the test by juxtaposing true and false affirmations, "sense and reason", calling on him or her to apply a critical mind to reading.

Lastly, Chapter 10 written by Flavio Gregori examines the diverse comic modes that animate *Tristram Shandy*, with a focus on humour, satire, and learned wit. It traces the evolution of humour from its physiological roots in classical medical theory to its transformation in eighteenth-century moral philosophy and literary characterisation. In *Tristram Shandy*, humour is rendered manifest both in bodily

temperament and character disposition, particularly through Walter Shandy's rationalistic obsessions and Uncle Toby's sentimental innocence. The chapter highlights the role of humour as "inverted sublime" in creating narrative disorder and philosophical plurality. Sterne's humour becomes the vehicle for a totality of contingency that resists systematisation and embraces human contradictions. Yet the chapter also argues that amiable and humorous readings fail to capture the text's more profound meaning, which is satirical in essence and targets the inadequacies of reason and sentiment from an Anglican moral standpoint. Sterne's satire feeds on parody, mock scholarship, and linguistic play to critique pedantry, religious hypocrisy, and intellectual vanity, while maintaining a spirit of generosity. Ultimately, Sterne fuses humour and satire into a comic mode that is both critical and optimistic, reflecting the chaos of life while offering laughter as a therapeutic and communal force.

1
Tristram Shandy, roman européen

Alain Montandon

« *I can't get out — I can't get out* » disait le sansonnet[1] du *Voyage sentimental* devant un Yorick assez décontenancé par les rigueurs de la Bastille. Cette image de l'oiseau dans sa cage, aspirant à la liberté[2], éveille de tendres et amères émotions dans le cœur du voyageur anglais que l'on trouvait déjà dans *Tristram Shandy* quand l'oncle Toby ouvrait la fenêtre pour libérer la mouche qui avait bourdonné tout le repas autour de son nez et à laquelle il rendit la liberté :

> —I'll not hurt thee, says my uncle Toby, rising from his chair, and going a-cross the room, with the fly in his hand,— I'll not hurt a hair of thy head:—Go, says he, lifting up the sash, and opening his hand as he spoke, to let it escape;—go poor Devil, get thee gone, why should I hurt thee?— This world surely is wide enough to hold both thee and me. (II, xii, p. 91[3])

Cette bonté envers les animaux pourrait nous amener à esquisser un rapprochement entre préoccupations écologiques et sentimentalité, l'amour des animaux comme de la nature étant bien présent à l'esprit du pasteur Laurence Sterne. On se souvient de son intérêt pour cet âne rencontré lors de son voyage en France au Livre VII (Chapitre xxxii) avec lequel il entre en conversation. Mais ce serait une première digression, puisque mouche et sansonnet ont d'abord évoqué l'idée de cette liberté si fondamentale dans le roman.

L'affirmation de cette liberté dans l'écriture de *Tristram Shandy* n'est sans doute pas nouvelle, mais l'écrivain assume un héritage avec une force encore jamais

1 Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey,* ed. Ian Jack (Oxford : Oxford University Press, Oxford World's Classics, 1998), p. 71. L'identification à l'oiseau est facilitée par le rapprochement des noms entre *starling* et *sterne*. L'emprisonnement de l'oiseau dans sa cage n'est pas sans rappeler le *Voyage du pèlerin vers l'éternité bienheureuse* de John Bunyan où l'homme désespéré s'exclame « je suis enfermé dans cette cage en fer. Je ne peux m'échapper ». Le célèbre « *I can't get out* » a été cité maintes fois, par Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen, etc.

2 Cet amour de la liberté (qu'on ne trouve pas sur le continent) a été célébré maintes fois en Angleterre, par Goldsmith (*Citizen of the World*), James Thomson (*Liberty, A Poem,* 1736), ou encore William Collins (*Ode to Liberty*, 1746).

3 Toutes les références sont à l'édition Oxford World's Classics au programme.

illustrée, au point que le roman peut sans doute être considéré comme l'apogée de l'écriture romanesque du dix-huitième siècle. On sait l'originalité et la liberté prises par Sterne dans *Tristram Shandy* avec la typographie. Il y fait preuve d'un usage révolutionnaire de celle-ci et de la ponctuation, d'une science rythmique et sémantique si extraordinaire qu'elle est l'instrument même de sa pensée.

Le *shandean dash* a de très nombreuses fonctions et effets. Il est d'abord le résultat d'une écriture littéralement « au fil de la plume » puisque l'auteur a bien dit que ce n'était pas lui, mais sa plume qui le gouvernait (« Ask my pen,—it governs me,—I govern not it », VI, vi, p. 334), ce qui autorise toute sorte de digressions, d'impromptus, de ruptures. D'où une fragmentation textuelle, un effet de saccade et un caractère de *non finito* qui donne au texte sa piquante saveur et cette impression de saisie sur le vif.

Le tiret a l'avantage de réserver sa place à une digression, à une incidente, sans l'isoler du reste, tout en conservant la continuité et la succession du discours qui peut bifurquer à tout moment. D'ailleurs écrire n'est-il pas pour Sterne un nom différent pour la conversation[4] ? Le tiret assure le style conversationnel tout au long, entre les personnages et les lecteurs. Il peut marquer un temps de repos, une pause, permettant de réserver pour ces derniers le temps de la réflexion, celui de la compréhension, ou celui de l'émotion. Il favorise ce que Henri Fluchère nomme « l'irradiation des ondes de l'émotion »[5]. Mais il anticipe aussi et signale le non-dit quand ce n'est pas l'énormité d'un événement scandaleux ou scabreux. Les silences qu'il instaure sont des effets de style, des pauses musicales qui en permettant un temps de récupération rythment le discours.

Chez Sterne, lorsqu'un ange passe, c'est qu'il y a ellipse, retour réflexif, rêverie, pudeur, mais aussi emphase, palpitations de toutes sortes qui redonnent au texte toute sa vélocité. Le décrochage énonciatif qu'il instaure par des ruptures de construction[6] permet cette grande souplesse avec laquelle il transmet le contenu événementiel et émotionnel. Mais la verve induite par les nombreux tirets sert également à marquer la perte des repères, la désorientation et l'égarement.

4 « Writing, when properly managed (as you may be sure mine is) is but a different name for conversation » (*Tristram Shandy*, II, xi, p. 87).

5 Henri Fluchère, *Laurence Sterne. De l'homme à l'œuvre. Biographie critique et essai d'interprétation de* Tristram Shandy, Paris, Gallimard, 1961, p. 625.

6 « La parataxe, la coupure sans logique, cette pulsion du tranchage qui obsède la famille Shandy – le tiret shandéen est ainsi la face visible de la pensée sans causalité logique dans l'enthymème, la réverbération de l'impossibilité du syllogisme comme moteur et motif d'un style purement progressif. La prose rythmique organise donc le contrepoint de ses juxtapositions syncopées sur l'utilisation adéquate de la parataxe et de l'enthymème – en contrepoint à la logique de la prédication. » (Éric Dayre, *Naissance du roman moderne*. Notes sur le dialogisme romanesque.

Cette liberté qui n'est pas sans libertinage est un coup de tonnerre dans l'Europe des lettres. *Tristram Shandy* est non seulement l'aboutissement du développement du roman au XVIII^e^ siècle, mais une œuvre qui s'inscrit au cœur même de toute la littérature européenne, au point que Victor Chlovski l'a définie comme « le roman le plus caractéristique de la littérature universelle »[7]. En effet, la très dense intertextualité du roman (on peut même parler d'hypertextualité), l'abondance d'une érudition vraie et factice, ne font pas oublier les références capitales que sont pour Sterne les œuvres de Cervantes, de Shakespeare, de Rabelais comme de Montaigne.

Lorsque Tristram donne de *l'Essai sur l'entendement humain* de Locke la définition que c'est « l'histoire [...] de ce qui se passe dans l'esprit d'un homme » (« what passes in a man's own mind » (II, ii, p. 70), on retrouve la même idée de Montaigne s'attachant dans les *Essais* à comprendre l'humaine nature. Sterne n'a-t-il pas dit à Garrick que Tristram Shandy était : « a picture of myself, & so far may bid the fairer for being an Original ». Or si le livre de Montaigne est un livre de chevet pour Sterne (« for my conning Montaigne as much as my pray'r-book »), c'est non seulement parce que, bien avant Pope, Montaigne affirme que l'intérêt de l'homme, c'est l'homme, mais aussi que chaque chose a cent faces, que la qualité la plus universelle est la diversité, idée partagée par Tristram qui saisit chaque poignée, « every handle, of what size or shape soever » (VII, xliii, p. 430). Le sens du relatif, de l'aléatoire, des circonstances, de la variété, de l'ambiguïté sont manifestes dans le style de l'essai, jouant sur le discontinu, la fracture et la digression. Sterne suit lui aussi dans le déroulement de sa pensée la démarche digressive et libre de Montaigne qui procède par sauts et gambades[8]. Il avance de façon intuitive, en changeant souvent de sujet selon les associations d'idées sous le couvert de la philosophie de Locke. Cette liberté de vagabonder, Diderot l'assumera également lorsqu'il fait dire au Neveu de Rameau : « Mes pensées, ce sont mes catins ». Les affinités de l'auteur de *Jacques le Fataliste* avec Sterne iront même jusqu'à l'emprunt par Diderot de plusieurs pages de *Tristam Shandy* qu'il inclut dans son roman, une histoire de genoux qui vaut bien celle de « A Cock and a Bull ».

Mais si Montaigne aborde la difficulté des hommes à parler ouvertement de la sexualité (« Qu'a fait l'action génitale aux hommes, si naturelle, si nécessaire et

http://cercc.ens-lyon.fr/IMG/pdf/notes_et_remarques_sur_Sterne_et_Cervantes.pdf)

7 Victor Chklovski, *Sur la théorie de la prose*, Lausanne, L'Âge d'Homme, 1973, p. 244. Traduit du russe par Guy Verret.

8 « Je vais au hasard et par sauts et gambades, tantôt prudemment, tantôt follement » (*Essais*, III, 9).

si juste, pour n'en oser parler sans vergogne [...] ? Il me semble qu'il y a plus de malice que de pudeur à ne vouloir point souffrir qu'on dise en paroles ce qu'on ne laisse pas de faire en effet[9] »), Sterne insiste lui aussi à dénoncer l'hypocrisie sociale qui entoure la chose et la honte de parler de choses naturelles :

> and wherefore, when we go about to make and plant a man, do we put out the candle? and for what reason is it, that all the parts thereof–the congredients–the preparations–the instruments, and whatever serves thereto, are so held as to be conveyed to a cleanly mind by no language, translation, or periphrasis whatever? (IX, xxxiii, p. 538)

Laurence Sterne a, dans *Tristram Shandy*, utilisé les ambiguïtés et les équivoques du langage pour parler de l'amour dans la perspective de la sexualité, des ressorts cachés de la machine, ce qui lui a valu une réputation d'obscénité que les critiques dès le XVIII^e^ mais surtout au XIX^e^ siècle se sont plu à souligner, comme Taine faisant du pasteur anglais un être hanté non par la sensualité, « non par la recherche du plaisir, ainsi que les Dorat, les Boufflers et tous les fins voluptueux qui riment et s'égaient de l'autre côté de la Manche », mais par la singularité, le scandale de la chose cachée : « Ce qui l'affriande dans le fruit défendu, ce n'est pas le fruit, c'est la défense ; car celui où il mord de préférence est tout flétri ou piqué aux vers ». Suivant Taine, le livre de Sterne est un récit occupé avec complaisance « à surveiller l'alcôve de deux bourgeois rances »[10]. Sans doute la critique est-elle aussi exagérée qu'injuste, mais il est vrai que le roman se situe dans un espace clos (à l'exception du Volume VII), celui d'une maison familiale anglaise. C'est là cependant un singulier malentendu pour un écrivain qui ne cesse de montrer de manière très moderne combien la sexualité hante nos démarches et notre langage, de manière inconsciente, et comment refoulement et censure participent de la mise en parole de notre monde. Sterne prend un plaisir évident à mettre en lumière que tout est miné par la pulsion de l'Eros, à commencer par le lecteur auquel il fait porter la responsabilité de ses lectures grivoises.

La portée générale satirique du roman, qui veut dévoiler les dessous de nos hypocrisies, sociales et morales, l'autorise, au grand dam des puritains, à montrer le physique de l'amour et à traiter librement (il est vrai non sans délectation) des choses du corps tout en esquissant une véritable phénoménologie de l'obscénité.

L'incipit et l'excipit de *Tristram Shandy* placent l'histoire sous le signe des relations sexuelles des parents de Tristram en train de créer, fort maladroitement

9 Montaigne, *Essais*, Livre III, Chapitre 5 (« Sur des vers de Virgile »).

10 H. Taine, *Histoire de la littérature anglaise*, Hachette, tome IV, 1878, p. 149.

d'ailleurs, leur rejeton (tout comme Tristram lui-même s'efforce d'écrire non sans difficultés son autobiographie) et celles d'un taureau et d'une vache. Si l'œuvre de Sterne ne cesse de jouer avec l'indicibilité des choses du sexe, c'est pour mieux les circonscrire et les rendre présentes, une chose non dite étant beaucoup plus présente et vive à l'imagination qu'une chose explicitée !

Plus qu'un fantasme, la sexualité est un excellent prétexte pour jouer avec les mots. Toute une rhétorique du sous-entendu donne à l'écrivain de nombreuses occasions de jouer avec le lecteur comme le chat avec la souris. *Tristram Shandy* est une histoire de bouts, et un homme amoureux « peut être allumé, comme une chandelle, par les deux bouts — pourvu que pointe une mèche de longueur suffisante—s'il n'y a pas de mèche, c'est la fin de l'histoire » (« he may be set on fire like a candle, at either end—provided there is a sufficient wick standing out; if there is not-there's an end of the affair », VIII, xv, p. 446). Tout en essayant de mettre le feu aux poudres, les mèches font long feu. Trim certes, amoureux de la belle Béguine, est plus inflammable que de l'amadou, lorsqu'elle lui frictionne sa blessure : plus les massages s'allongent et plus le feu s'allume dans ses veines jusqu'à ce que deux ou trois frictions plus prolongées mènent sa passion à son paroxysme. Et Mrs Wadman, hardie à vouloir rompre son veuvage, décide d'attaquer l'oncle Toby par les deux bouts à la fois, ce qui est des plus nécessaires chez un militaire blessé à l'aine qui ne connait rien des femmes :

> Methinks, brother, replied my father, you might, at least, know so much as the right end of a woman from the wrong; […] Right end, — quoth my uncle *Toby*, muttering the two words low to himself, and fixing his two eyes insensibly as he muttered them, upon a small crevice, form'd by a bad joint in the chimney-piece.— Right end of a woman!—I declare, quoth my uncle, I know no more which it is, than the man in the moon. (II, vii, p. 82-83)

La campagne amoureuse attaquée en termes militaires est près de venir à bout des résistances de la place-forte. Aussi n'est-il pas étonnant que l'oncle Toby – attaqué si rudement sur ses deux ailes – soit bousculé en son centre. Le jeu sur l'endroit exact où l'oncle Toby a été blessé utilise un quiproquo des plus plaisants, puisque l'innocent militaire concède à la veuve qu'il lui fera toucher du doigt l'emplacement exact de sa blessure. Mais le trouble de Mrs Wadman ne durera pas longtemps quand on fera amener la carte pour y examiner le lieu véritable, l'autre ne pouvant être nommé, ni désigné en dépit des efforts de Trim qui essaye